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LEVERAGING SOUND, SPACE AND VISUAL ART IN AN INSTALLATION

by

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Introduction

Like grunts and gestures were primitive forms of an individual's desires to communicate, the work of many artists is the attempt to make themselves understood—perhaps out of a lack of efficacy for verbal communication, or driven by a distaste for the way people perceive words in those context.

The work I've produced is a product of the way I interact with society, and my frustrations with the limitations of verbal conversation. Conversations are often times limited to the cursory and inane—there is little to be gained or given from surface discussion, yet it is in that limbo which many exist in order to gain the trust of another. Because I overthink every interaction, I limit the depth of my feelings expressed through literal language out of a lack of trust in people and society. The outcome manifests itself in a drive to express myself without or beyond the prototypical verbal toolset. In creating means of self-expression, artists leverage adaptation and modification of existing languages. This can be achieved across many mediums: poets use written language and metaphorical devices to convey deeper meanings, while painters recreate and modify conceptions of the images they see or conceive. Self-expressive musicians and songwriters use an amalgamation of sound, theory and written language to capture their meaning. Van Gogh, for instance, was better able to express his manic episodes by creating distorted, impressionistic landscapes and imagery that provided his audience with a view into his reality. Kurt Cobain found his outlet in poetic, sometimes disturbing metaphorical language combined with music. In his sketches, paintings and poetry, Cobain was able to successfully

capture the same feeling in his art that he did in his music, not by overlapping processes or combining them, but by creating them from the same part of his brain, in a uniformly spontaneously creative and even synesthetic fashion.



Figure 1: Kurt Cobain's journal sketch titled "Insecticide", undated.

Musicians generally aspire to create recognizable sound in their music. The creation of recognizable sound in turn creates a "signature", which in reality is a series of recognizable patterns that can be attributed back to the creator. Musicians express themselves through language that has been previously explored, and alter it with their own process. For example, Robert Johnson, one of the first recorded blues guitarists, developed a vernacular within the

musical foundations of language—off of which artists like The Rolling Stones, Jack White, Son House, and many other blues and rock musicians created standalone and unique work.

Because of my distrust for self-expression through verbal language, my pursuit thus far in art has been to discover a satisfactory means of self-expression. In study of the work I've created across all mediums, through poetry, music and visual art, this desire for a satisfactory outlet of self-expression has resulted in a drive to create meaning through combining mediums.

Throughout this semester, my interest in mixed mediums has resulted largely in experimentation with the combination of music and visual art, as well as exploring the standalone merit of each. This also entails a study of their overlaps, cooperative influence, and the effectiveness in establishing comprehensible and replicable patterns with which artists can make themselves understood. The installation *Hyper Vigilant* leverages the three-wall space provided, the graffiti-like, cartoonish imagery, and the soundscape (which combines chatter and music) to create an environment in which the feelings I experience in an episode of panic, or in a bout of anxiety are fully represented. This paper will discuss the use of a combination of sound, visual art and space in an installation, through an exploration of the art theory, and a discussion of precedents. It will ultimately culminate in an examination of the installation at hand.

Exploring the Theory Behind Installation Art

The most common instance where visuals and sound can be combined in fine arts is in installation art—more specifically installations combining static visual images, space, and in some cases sound; or installations combining film, sound and space.

Installation is a form of conceptual art, where the ideas take the primary emphasis over the “finished” product—with the intention of creating an environment capable of amplifying the effect on an audience. In installations, the work is typically a collage of mediums, which can include painting, sculpture, video, drawing, photography and performance. In this genre, the work generally combines at least two of these mediums to create an environment. Not adhering to orthodox artwork, it’s difficult to define the parameters of installation art. As the University of Chicago’s Media Theory blog writes, “It is a hodge-podge of objects, images and sounds, refusing to be categorized into the standard artistic genres (painting, sculpture, drawing, for instance) [.]” Theoretically, installation art is three-dimensional—which is natural, assuming that the purpose of the work is to create an environment capable of creating meaning as an encompassing, collage-type work. Ilya Kabakov, an installation artist, describes installation as an active consolidation and modification of space in which a collage of objects “attempts to encompass all the levels of the world... that describe everything that happens to it.” Therefore, the goal of the installation is to create a synthetic reality in which the separation between everyday life and art is blurred and distorted. That creates a unique opportunity for the artist to share with the audience a more controlled “bubble” of reality, in which the meaning can be

expanded through different mediums cohesively. Installation art effectively eschews the values of other genres of art in that it inverts the principles of self-containment, instead enveloping the audience in the space of a work. Installations rely heavily on the space with which they are provided, in order to successfully create, control and sustain a synthetic environment. To quote Kabakov again, he wrote of installation art: “[One] is simultaneously both a ‘victim’ and viewer, who on the one hand surveys and evaluates the installation, and on the other, follows those associations, recollections which arise in him[;] he is overcome by the intense atmosphere of the total illusion[.]”

Artists Combining Visual Art, Music and Space in Installations

Artists who have successfully combined visual art, space, and music in installation pieces vary greatly. An installation I engaged with in-person was Ragnar Kjartansson’s “The Visitors” (created in 2012). The installation features nine screens, angled throughout to promote continuously shifting engagement with each. Each screen featured one of nine musicians repeating the same lyrics in separate rooms at Rokeby farm, a nineteenth-century mansion in upstate New York. Each performer uses different instruments, playing the lyrics with their independent emotional connection to the music as a camera moves through the house in one take. The work is an hour-long piece, tumultuous in emotional range and feeling, and is incredibly immersive in its surround-sound, continuously engaging visuals and cohesive effect. I, along with many other viewers, was moved to tears by the work—and would consider it highly effective as an installation.



Figure 2: A photograph of video installation The Visitors, by Ragnar Kjartansson, 2014.

Another example of effective installation art is Keith Haring's "Pop Shop", created in 1986 in downtown Manhattan. Here, Haring combined space and visual art to create an environment that helped him extend and amplify the meaning of his work—or in his words, "If I only made paintings in a gallery I would probably be frustrated." The space features repetitive and continuous imagery along walls and pillars, to an immersive and engaging effect.



Figure 3: Keith Haring's "Pop Shop", 1986

Another interesting example of installation art is the use of virtual spaces, combined with visuals and sound. Tom J. Clarke, a British composer and sound designer, created a virtual installation in 2016 titled “Sounds for Virtual Spaces”. His goal is to form a dialogue between sound and visual materials in an immersive environment; the work features a three-part installation in which the spectator can engage with one of three environments: a mechanical, polyrhythmic sound space, a haunted cabin scored by creepy music, or a therapeutic pitch-based installation. The environments are all interactive and highly immersive, with the use of virtual reality, surround-sound audio and interactive imagery.

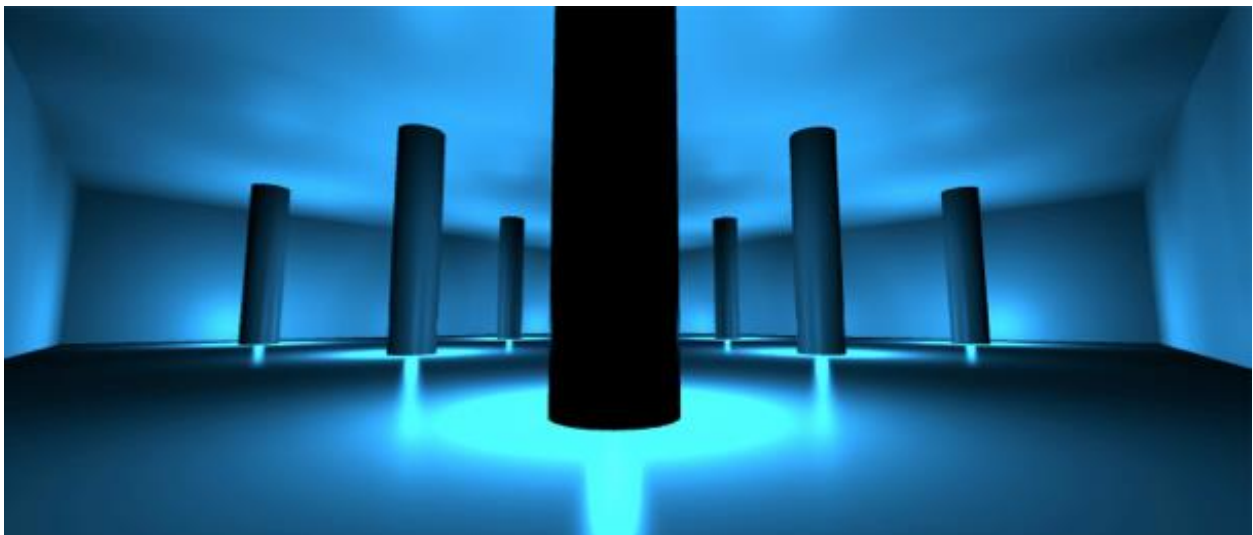


Figure 4: Tom Clarke's "Sounds for Virtual Spaces", 2016.

Other Means of Combining Sound and Visual Art

Another popular combination of visual art and music is in music videos. Music videos are often a means for an artist to provide a visual accompaniment with their work, and by extension, enhance the value of the creation. Some artists use it to make statements outside the original meaning of their music, while some use it as an opportunity to amplify the original meaning.

For example, few can recall Michael Jackson's hit song "Thriller" without remembering the famous video that accompanied it, resplendent with skits, dancing and spooky visuals. Kurt Cobain, on the other hand, leveraged music videos to comment on the interpretations of Nirvana's music. For example, in the song "In Bloom", off of the album *Nevermind*, Cobain created an ironic and contradictory visual series in which the display changed repeatedly between two versions of the same song. In one version, the band were dressed in suits, singing in front of adoring fans screaming throughout—with the intention of creating the appearance of a 1950s boy band. Cobain was wearing glasses, with his hair back, singing and smiling in a pseudo-sincere fashion. Meanwhile, in the alternate version, the band was on drugs destroying the set, screaming and flailing violently. The intention was to extend the meaning of the song beyond its original satire (which was to poke fun at their fans who knew their songs but not the meanings). It was made more obvious through the use of film, where they wore dresses in the later part to mock homophobic fans.



Figure 5: Image still from Nirvana's "In Bloom" music video, 1992.

Here, the works are created with more independence of one another, even though they may appear to be incredibly cohesive afterwards. The intention of artistic music videos, then, is to either fulfill a need to create an “add-on” to the music produced by a group, or to cater to consumer demands of the group. While it enhances the meaning of the work, it doesn’t always (and often doesn’t) come from the same creative source, and isn’t created by the same artist. Much like album artwork (Kanye West and Takashi Murakami, The Offs and Basquiat, among others), the meaning may be closely related, but the creative origin differs substantially—enough that it is fair to consider those intersections more towards cooperative/interactive standalone works.

Other artists combine visual art and music in the process leading up to a work, rather than demonstrating its intersection in a final product. For example, Russian abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky created paintings which had no representational resemblance to musical notation of any sort. Yet, he titled some of his works “Composition”, and often commented on their “playability”. Kandinsky was believed to have had synesthesia, a condition allowing him to simultaneously appreciate sounds, colors or words. In his case, colors and painted marks triggered particular sounds or musical notes and vice versa. Synesthesia is a blend of the Greek words for together (syn) and sensation (aesthesia). With Kandinsky, there is debate over whether he actually had the condition, or was simply experimenting with combining the two mediums in his artistic process—but the idea that music is linked to visual art had been long-explored before that time. Artists like Beethoven and Schubert were also believed to have had synesthesia.

Other artists, like Stuart Davis, attempted to visually represent musical mediums. In his piece “Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors—7th Avenue Style”, Davis created a sensory experience of the modern city through the lens of jazz—and then through the lens of visual art. It is the visual equivalent of the syncopated rhythms of jazz—using a vibrant palette and abstract composition. His work was also successful in creating leveraging a combined medium process, even though it was only the visual art medium that was exhibited.



Figure 6: Stuart Davis' "Hot Still-Scape for Six Colors - 7th Avenue Style", 1940.

As it pertains to synesthesia, the condition itself isn't necessarily an indication of additional competency in the comprehension and intuitive combination of two or more mediums, but is

certainly a condition that enhances the experience of a work. With this approach, art influences music, just as music created or engaged with influences the art—here, one doesn't intend to arrange either form with the intention of creating a structured notation, but the motions, experiences, sweeps and ultimately the experiences here are uniform and universal. This concept is difficult to explain to those who do not experience imagery and music simultaneously, but each decision in both mediums is naturally linked and inherently cohesive.



Figure 7: Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913

Assessment of *Hyper Vigilant* as an Installation

In presenting *Hyper Vigilant* as an installation that combines sound, space and static imagery, the intention was to create an environment where the three mediums would theoretically complement and amplify one another, in order to more accurately show my distorted reality,

being the product of my episodes of panic and bouts of anxiety. I attempted to leverage my “synesthetic” approach to music and visual arts in creating a soundscape that retained cohesiveness with the imagery on the walls, intending for them to create an environment in ways that they could not do independently of one another. As Kandinsky said, “...lend your ears to music, open your eyes to painting, and... stop thinking!” This is representational of the way I perceive the combination of the music and visual components, and why I struggle to explain it. I perceive the work as the inherent and logical combination of the two mediums. Because I created both the characters and music in episodes of panic and anxiety, the process and approach was uniform—the aggression and simplicity with which I created each were one—the hidden repetition of the characters and the distorted repetitions of the music both were created from the same part of my brain. With the soundscape, my goal was to combine both my synesthetic approach to visualizing the music, as well as a more literal component of my episodes in order to retain better ties across the mediums—and in order to mitigate the issues found in expecting the audience to make inherent and logical connections between the music and visual components. I was able to accomplish this through combining the slow, bass-heavy, low-fidelity guitar recordings with the incessant chatter in the background. This is a means of explaining the rhythmic pulsations I experience, alongside the melancholia that follows an episode, and helps to provide a more literal window into an experience where I’m assaulted by a cacophony of voices. It also established a more developed storyline in the soundscape by establishing a relationship between the music, serving as the protagonist, and the antagonist—here, the incessant waves of chatter in the background, which eventually envelop, overwhelm and consume the music.

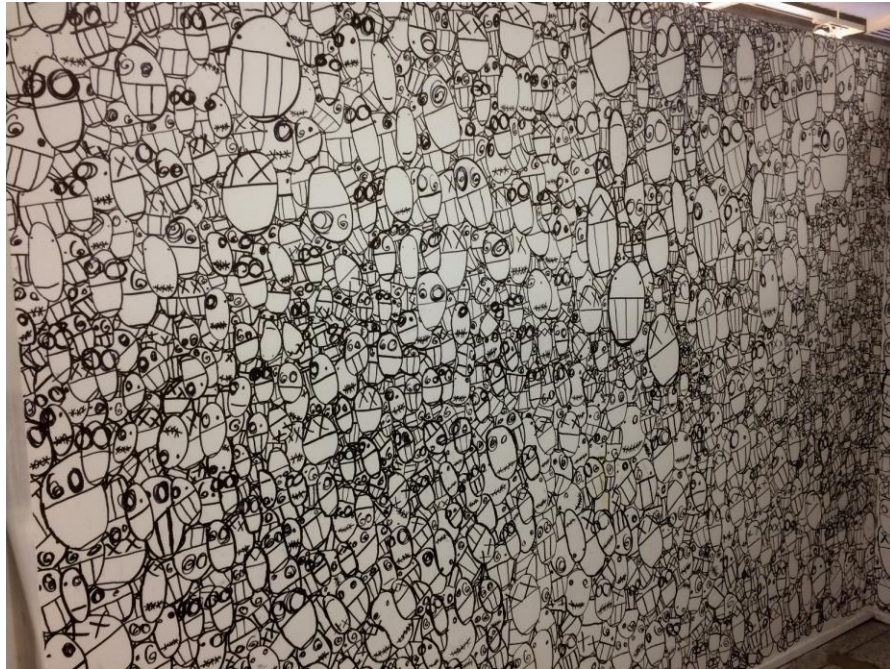


Figure 8: A detail shot of the left wall in Hyper Vigilant.

The effect of using the speaker facing one direction was to “box in” the viewer—which simplified the issue of the lack of an enclosed room in which I could create my environment. Given more time, I would be interested in creating a “surround-sound” type experience, where the audience would be compelled to more actively engage with individual characters in the installation.

The drawings themselves were inspired by efforts from both the fine art and street art world. Their cartoonish faces and quick strokes were in recognition of the haste with which street artists are forced to make their work, but also retained the desired simplification of how I perceive crowds in an episode of panic. Artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat were able to create a vernacular that leveraged highly repetitive imagery to create meaning and effect. Also inspirational to me was the work of Takashi Murakami, a Japanese artist whose

large-scale, intricate paintings of piled skulls led me to experiment with the combination of the characters I had developed. This resulted in an array of faces, packed together in panic—helping me capture the meaning I couldn't achieve with just one face.



Figure 9: A view of the space, with all 3 walls.

In sum, the intention of this installation was to successfully use the space's dimensions, the characters, and the soundscape in combination in order to create a more encompassing environment than any one of those mediums could offer as standalone works. This stemmed from dissatisfaction with the effects attained through the use of singular mediums, which did not capture the full effect desired. I'd like to thank Professors Kasper Kovitz and Adam Davis for their help in both the development of my work throughout the semester.

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